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Hopes rise - will lakes?

Experts disagree on whether snow will affect water levels

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SOUTH HAVEN - The Black River leading out to Lake Michigan is a frozen, white sheet, and thick slabs of ice jut more than a half-mile off the South Haven shoreline.

Tourist season seems light years away after a month-long blast of bitter cold and heavy snow. But some in this resort community welcome the deep freeze, hoping it signals an end to a low-water cycle that threatens the local economy like an extended ebb tide.

"There seems to be a bit more encouraging conversations going on," said Tom Geisler, owner of All Seasons Marine on the Black River. "(But) it's not going to happen overnight."

Water enthusiasts and coastal business owners hope the record December snowfall will help replenish Lake Michigan and inland lakes statewide - or at least slow three years of steadily declining lake levels.

But the impact of last month's five-plus feet of snow is a point of contention among Great Lakes and weather experts.

Roger Gauthier, supervisory hydrologist with the

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U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, said the heavy snowfall in West Michigan has not changed his prediction for another down season on Lake Michigan.

Gauthier expects the water level next spring and summer to come within about 6 inches of the record low in 1964.

Army Corps data show that, as of Friday, Lake Michigan was 7 inches below last year's level at this time and 23 inches below the long-term average for January. The lake now is a scant 7 inches above the all-time low for January, set in 1965, and is expected to drop another inch by February.

Gauthier said the entire Great Lakes region would require much more snow to change the downward trend.

"There has been a lot of snow in the lower extremes of Michigan, but not enough further north," he said. "Even though it's excessive locally, it's not excessive regionally."

In fact, the Lake Superior watershed has had 30 percent less precipitation than average so far this winter season and the Lake Michigan watershed is down by 10 percent.

"We're a victim of Mother Nature," said Robin Abshire, South Haven harbor master. "The snow's going to help, but it's not near enough."

The city of South Haven and riverfront property owners paid to dredge the harbor last year, but nonetheless witnessed an estimated 3 percent financial downturn. Action at the municipal marina is strong because of an ideal location, but upstream marinas suffered, Abshire said.

Now she's predicting problems this summer for some big boats.

"The dredging definitely had a positive impact," Abshire said. "But the boats with 4 1/2-foot or larger draft definitely are going to have trouble navigating upstream."

And boat traffic means big money to the community.

The rule of thumb is that each boater who enters the harbor spends an estimated \$150 per day in South Haven, she said.

Gauthier said he won't rule out the possibility that additional snowfall could help boost the level a little.

"We've got a long ways to go yet this winter," he said. "We really have to wait until mid-March, when the snowpack melts, before we'll know for sure."

Army Corps officials say Lake Michigan will not benefit significantly from the harsh winter because a large part of the moisture came from the lake originally through lake-effect snow.

Frank Quinn, a senior research hydrologist for the Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory in Ann Arbor, is more optimistic.

"We would be in much worse shape without the snow we've had," he said. "It's going to help us probably some."

Quinn said the snowfall's impact on lake levels may depend on how it melts.

"What we would like to see is for the snow to stay until spring and to go into the lake as a large surge. (But) nothing is going to bring it way up," he said. "It would have to be an extreme amount of snow to do that."

National Weather Service predictions for the next three months call for near normal precipitation with below normal temperatures, said meteorologist Bob Dukesherer.

He figures it will take at least a couple of hard, snowy winters to make a dent on Lake Michigan's level.

For his part, All Seasons Marina's Geisler thinks the media has overblown the low-water story, which in turn helps account for recent dips in South Haven tourism.

He says it's only "some inconvenience for a few boaters."

Abshire just asks for more cold weather.

"We need Lake Michigan to freeze so the evaporation will slow down," she said. "We're losing so much through evaporation."

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